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BIBLE BELT GAYS: INSIDERS-WITHOUT

During a Spring 2012 visit to a university nestled in the Appalachian Mountains, my hosts introduced me to an openly gay Episcopalian priest active in a variety of local progressive causes, including gay rights issues. While enjoying a buffet luncheon of Indian food, I learned that Father “Joe” (all the names are changed) had lived many years in Central Kentucky and we knew several people in common. After a run-through of our personal connections, Father Joe shared other tidbits of his life story, including that he had not been raised Episcopalian. He explained, “I grew up in a fundamentalist family who were Pentecostals, and for a time I tried to pray the gay away. I was an ex-gay leader with Exodus International.” Father Joe’s journey from conservative Christian to ex-gay spokesperson to out clergy echoed many of the stories I share in my book *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* which draws on ethnographic observations and interviews with 59 lesbians and gay men from the region to explore what it means to be a Bible Belt gay.

Like most of the gay people I interviewed, Father Joe grew up immersed in Bible Belt Christianity. In his struggle with same sex attractions, he turned to God for help, participated in ex-gay ministries, and finally his strong engagement with theology called him to the priesthood after he came out. A revered and charismatic leader in his community, by any definition (but homophobic) “a son to be proud of,” Father Joe’s family has yet fully to accept his homosexuality. Nor is homosexuality the only social issue on which he and his family disagree. Exasperated, he explained that his mother keeps her television on FOX News most of the time. After lengthy negotiations, with a commitment to “keeping the peace,” Father Joe confided, laughing, “When I visit she changes the channel from FOX News to the only channel we can watch together: the weather station.” Father Joe, like many Bible Belt gays interviewed for *Pray the Gay Away*, is an “insider-without”: someone with an insider understanding of conservative Christian practices, because he once identified as such and still regularly interacts with conservative Christians, but whose homosexuality marginalizes him in his family circle

and among the community of the “saved.” This essay explores the unique vision Bible Belt gays have as “insiders without” living side by side with conservative Christians in families, workplaces, schools and neighborhoods. Once perceived of as “one of us,” forced into the status of “one of them,” Bible Belt gays straddle two worlds.

Conceptually, “insider-without” is an extension of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins’ theory of the “outsider-within” highlighted in her groundbreaking book, *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins wrote that when members of oppressed groups interact in intimate settings with majority members, they have a “distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group’s actions and ideologies.” To illustrate, Collins described the “peculiar marginality” of Black female domestic workers in white families. Because they are closely involved in the day to day functioning of a family, Black domestic workers may form relationships with family members, especially the children, and see “white power demystified.” At the same time, Black domestic workers are not family members, are usually economically exploited and remain outsiders. Collins defined this insider gaze coupled with outsider status as the location of “outsider-within.”

Like Black domestic workers and, as Collins theorized, like Black women in general, Bible Belt gays also have an insider gaze and an outsider status. But while domestic workers enter a family unit as outsiders and over time become more familiar to majority members (though rarely being fully accepted), the lives of Bible Belt gays follow a different trajectory. They begin as insiders in their families, schools, churches and neighborhoods and later face the threat of ostracism and expulsion to the extent that others suspect they are gay and/or if they come out. While there is much variation among Bible Belt gays in how they experience coming out, and I explore these issues in detail in *Pray the Gay Away* (the most significant element is having a supportive family), all Bible Belt gays move from insiders to outsiders as they acknowledge and integrate same-sex attractions in a region dominated by conservative Christians.

Bible Belt Christianity

Conservative Christian, conservative protestant, fundamentalist, evangelical—none of these designations perfectly captures the climate that Bible Belt gays described. Although

individual Christian churches adhere to different norms—some forbid dancing, some expect women to sit in the back pews, only wear skirts and never cut their hair, some sport live bands, some expect member to walk door to door saving souls for Christ—most Christian denominations in the Bible Belt, from Baptist to Methodist to Holiness to Catholic to Jehovah’s Witness to Mormon to non-denominational, are uniform in their construction of homosexuality as sinful. And it is this condemnation of homosexual behavior that is most salient for Bible Belt gays. Because the vast majority of places one might worship in the Bible Belt are homophobic, close to 100% of interview subjects logged significant time learning that same-sex attractions are bad, sinful and disgusting in places of worship. Thus, from the perspective of lesbians and gay men from the region, the term that best conveys the rampant and widespread presence of homophobia within Christian institutions is “Bible Belt Christianity.”

Nor is Bible Belt Christianity singularly confined to religious institutions and Sunday worship. Christian crosses, messages, paraphernalia, music, news and attitudes saturate everyday settings thus influencing a wide range of local secular institutions like schools and workplaces, and Bible Belt Christians exert a powerful influence on city, county and state political and cultural institutions. In many counties, institutional authority figures openly opposed to homosexuality enforcing homophobic institutional policies and practices set the tone for how families and communities perceive and treat gay people. Further, Bible Belt Christianity trains members of the region—both those who are heterosexual *and* gay—repeatedly to present their Christian identity to others in routine social interactions. Not to do so invites attention and marks one as an outsider. This is especially so in rural areas with small populations in which people know one another and each other’s family histories spanning generations. In these areas, regardless of any individual’s actual church attendance, most people self-identify as “Christian”—which people largely assume to mean conservative Protestant—, defer to the assumed righteousness of any “Christian” institution and are suspicious of and deem inferior anyone who is not Christian.

Furthermore, in the presence of someone espousing conservative Christian attitudes, even those who do not share them may hesitate to say so because of the regional social norm of “personalism.” Essayist Loyal Jones describes personalism as a

traditional Appalachian value, explaining, “We will go to great lengths to keep from offending others, even sometimes appearing to agree with them when in fact we do not. It is more important to get along with one another than it is to push our own views.” Not only an Appalachian phenomenon, personalism—the desire to fit in, to get along with one’s neighbors, to not offend, to present the social façade of harmony and good humor—influences social interactions throughout the Bible Belt. In this environment, regardless of one’s opinions on a particular topic—teen sex, abortion, going to church, women’s role in the household, gay marriage or even where the pond you used to swim in is located—people typically do not contradict one another, and they especially do not disagree with authority figures like parents, preachers and teachers. Doing so invites censure and isolation.

Some people only attend church to avoid being talked about by other members of the community. Such individuals rarely challenge the preacher, whose high regard most are seeking, to speak out for homosexuals, an almost universally despised group in the region. Indeed, in fundamentalist churches, like the one Misty (who is white, 24 and from Eastern Kentucky) attended, pastoral authority is ordained by God. When there is little to no impetus to stand up for gay rights, homophobia persists unchallenged. Misty explained, “This, for me, is a major way religion and my family colluded to keep me or anyone in the toxic closet. You see your whole immediate family, not agreeing so much like they are sitting and nodding their heads as he speaks, but you see them in no way disagreeing. They listen intently, shake the preacher’s hand on the way out with a smile and the belief system has been reinforced.” Such personalism creates the impression that “everyone” (meaning good Christian folk) seamlessly agree that homosexuals are an “abomination,” even when some may not. With one’s Christian identity constantly on display, and one’s Christian practices judged by neighbors, friends and relatives, modeling the appearance of submission to God’s authority—as interpreted by church authority—is expected. This makes at least the *presentation* of complicity with Bible Belt Christianity compulsory for most in the region, and it indelibly marks homosexuals as outsiders.

The Insider-Without View from the Margins

Although it is painful to move from insider to outsider, and confusing to be rejected by loved ones for something over which one has no control, processing rejection and ostracism also offered many Bible Belt gays the opportunity to exhibit what psychologists call “posttraumatic growth.” Growth happens when an individual learns to interpret adversity suffered in ways that empowers her. For example, many people I interviewed appreciated the unique gaze they had on those around them, what Mary, who is white, 61 and from Central Kentucky, called “the view from the margins.” Mary believed that being an oppressed minority—being gay—enables a person to see aspects of social life invisible to those who are privileged, including the destructive consequences of blindly adhering to hierarchical power structures. As insiders-without, gay people, Mary explained, “see things that people who are privileged don’t see.” This means they may better understand how power and dominance operate, and they may develop strategies to resist, circumvent and/or transform stressful situations.

Derek, who is 39, white, originally from Illinois and a long-time resident of Central Kentucky, illustrated this skill set. A self-described “right-wing homophobe,” and politically active conservative Christian for much of his life, Derek shared well-earned insight into the psychology of conservative Christians during our interview. In the early 1990s, after starting, but not finishing a degree in theology—largely because of his struggle over his same-sex attractions—Derek started work at a Christian publishing company. Through the editor-in-chief, Derek met a notoriously homophobic conservative Christian politician running for State Senate who hired Derek to be “his right-hand man.” During this time, Derek began dating a man and, as he explained, it became “known more widely in the gay community that ‘Candidate Fred’ had this gay guy working for him and a few people got upset about that and threatened to out me.” Derek lost friends and was asked not to teach Bible Studies to children at his church when people learned he was gay, even while he was still a self-identified conservative Christian. Under this strain, Derek decided to out himself to “Fred.” Derek asked Fred to lunch and in the privacy of the car, shared that he was gay. Fred responded, “I think it’s no worse than somebody that’s an alcoholic or has some other personal struggle that they have to deal with, so if you need anything just let me know.” Derek explained that he was relieved this had gone

so well, but soon found himself shut out of any visible political association with Fred.

Strongly committed to both his Republican and Christian identities, Derek described a slow journey from conservative Christian to democratic Episcopalian. His Christian mindset was such that, he felt, “your grocer should be Christian and your exterminator should be Christian.” One of the defining characteristics of fundamentalism is separation from secular society. Fundamentalists fear that interacting with those who are unsaved may tempt them astray from God’s law. Derek explained “that many Christians or conservative Christians or people that are considered to be Christians don’t know how to get along in this world with people that are different.” Because of this, Derek believes some Christians are afraid to think for themselves and prefer to let self-identified Christian politicians like Candidate Fred think for them. For such people, it is only necessary to wave one’s Christian card to be recognized as “one of us.” Derek continued, “And when they need something, they just look in the yellow pages and find anybody that advertises their religious symbol, and then they don’t have to be afraid that they are not of their Jesus.” Derek explained that he especially wanted heterosexual Christians to understand that he was also a Christian who adhered to a similar set of core Christian beliefs. Unafraid to meet conservative Christians on their home turf, Derek shared that he visited a local conservative seminary and sat down with a large group of seminarians to talk about what it was like to be gay and Christian. Derek said, “I spent a good deal of time offering my Christian credentials and talking to them in their language, which I know. I am a Christian, and I am even their kind of Christian in many, many senses.” Derek wanted the seminary students to realize that he was “their neighbor and not their enemy.”

Derek demonstrated what Mary described as an “alternative to raw power.” She elaborated, “When you’re in an oppressed position, you learn a lot about power that you don’t learn when you’re in the powerful position. You learn all sorts of alternatives to raw power. The people who are reflective have a whole different kind of knowledge that just isn’t accessible to people who have it easier in the world.” What the reflective insiders-without, or outsiders-within, better perceive (as minority members who question inequality and who do not accept the dominators’ perception of themselves) is another, more egalitarian, feminist paradigm of power: power-with. When a group of people adopt

the “power-with” framework, fear of scarcity evaporates. In a power-with paradigm, the more we share, the less we fear and try to control, the more we all benefit. Being an outsider-within, or an insider-without, allows a minority member to see beyond a hierarchical power paradigm and sometimes to transform it.

The Nature of Transformation

One of the central questions I have grappled with throughout researching and writing *Pray the Gay Away* is what causes personal transformation. What makes someone reject a fundamentalist mind frame while another embraces it? What set of variables, or experiences, allow one to value sexual and gender diversity rather than fearing it? What moment(s) can an individual point to that marks the change from shame to self-acceptance? Interview subjects, friends, family members, colleagues, even acquaintances at barbeques have all willingly engaged in dialogue about the nature of change, and gracefully endured relentless probing into their personal biographies to find some answers to these difficult questions. What these conversations suggest is no one path or formula. There are instead many stories and many paths, and what works for one person will not necessarily work for another. Further, change often happens gradually so there may be no moment of epiphany one can identify.

When I look at the Bible Belt through my interview subjects’ eyes, I see a place defined by homophobia, but also a place complicated by family and community ties with a uniquely caring culture. “Those” people, the conservative Christians voting against gay civil rights, are the grandparents and sisters and uncles and cousins and neighbors of gay people. Many of these Bible Belt heterosexuals have cared for their gay relatives and friends all their lives, even if they don’t know it, and deserve better than to be lumped into a fundamentalist soup, ridiculed and disregarded. As author Alice Walker observed in an open letter to President-elect Barack Obama when he was elected in 2008, “Most damage that others do to us is out of fear, humiliation and pain... We must learn actually not to have enemies, but only confused adversaries who are ourselves in disguise.” The single desire most expressed by Bible Belt gays in interviews is that others understand that we are all human and all connected because we are all, as Walker noted, one another

“in disguise.” For insiders-without, the line between foe and friend is necessarily blurry. For example, how can a grandmother who raised you, cooks Sunday dinner every week, and yet declares you “can’t be gay and Christian” be automatically pigeon-holed as the “enemy?”

During lunch at the Indian buffet, the conversation with Father Joe segued into the 2012 election season. Observing that we are two countries sharing one border, whose residents continue to confound one another, Father Joe and I agreed that those of us from red and blue states, rural and urban areas, coasts, plains and mountains need a map out of the polarized “culture wars,” not more ammunition. The stories of Bible Belt gays offer us just such a guide, for they have lived with and they love, and are loved by, conservative Christians. They grew up worshiping God side-by-side with one another. Bible Belt gays understand the religious doctrine that makes their family members, friends and neighbors fear and condemn homosexuality. This understanding, earned during the journey from insider to outsider, offers to the “reflective” a strong skill set to deflect and transform homophobic attitudes.

Recommended Readings

Ammerman, Nancy Tate. 1987. *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.